

Bird Aid

The long dreary wet windy winter has come to an end with a mad rush. The trees and hedges came into full leaf in just a few days. Blossoms of Wild Plum, Blackthorn, Wild Pear, Cherry, Bird Cherry, Apple and Hawthorn have tumbled over each other, in quick succession, bringing joy and colour to the farm. The birds too are looking and sounding much happier with the Dawn Chorus louder than ever. I don't think I have ever heard so many Nuthatches claiming their territories.

Encouraged and supported by Bird Aid along with Natural England, we have been winter feeding the farmland birds for 14 years, with areas of sown mixtures and followed by supplementary ground feeding as the sown plots become exhausted. This year has been challenging partly because the 'hungry gap' has been so long but also the awful weather. Cold, windy, wet and several dramatic snowstorms producing deep drifts. Where to feed when the snow lies so deep? We used tractors to get to the feed sites and to create firm tracks of compacted snow in which to scatter seed. Our routine is to feed 40kgs daily for about 120 days, of 80% crushed wheat and barley with 20% millet, rapeseed and linseed, tailored to the small birds and the mix is scattered as thinly as possible over a wide area. This is to make the feed less attractive to the larger birds, while the small ones have less competition and can get the 5gms that each need daily to stay alive. We also have hanging feeders full of millet as a backup. Starvation is the most important cause of the decline in farmland bird numbers and variety.

Two years we joined forces with Ian Wilkinson of Cotswold Seeds in a study of farmland specialist birds over the winter months, to see how they use the sown plots and the ground feeding areas. This research is undertaken by professional ecologists, Dr Richard Broughton and Dr Marta Maziarz. The results so far seem both encouraging and consistent and are showing several important details. 1) The numbers of birds increase as winter progresses, presumably because birds migrate in from the surrounding area as sources of food dry up. 2) Numbers peak in February/March when the hungry gap is at its worst, then gradually decline as birds disperse to take up breeding habitats. 3) Birds stop using the 'control' plots in January because the food is finished and congregate around the supplementary feeding sites. 4) Numbers of each species vary from year to year for reasons that are not clear at present. A good study always generates more questions!

The tentative conclusion is that with today's farming methods it is essential to provide ample additional food for the farmland specialists well into the spring if we are to halt their decline and restore numbers to 1960s levels. We hope that another year's study will produce clear enough data to produce a scientifically credible publication that could inform future farming policy.

This winter we had very excellent numbers of Chaffinches, Linnets, Yellowhammers, Reed Bunting, Bramblings from Europe and House Sparrows. For reasons we cannot yet explain the Tree Sparrows that were present in large numbers 5 years ago have disappeared altogether. It is not from lack of food!

Could it be disease or competition from others, like increasing numbers of the more aggressive House Sparrows, or perhaps an evolutionary advantage to changing habitat from time to time? We don't know!